Reviewer’s report

Title: "What do the JAMA Editors Say When They Discuss Manuscripts That They are Considering For Publication? Developing a Schema for Classifying the Content of Editorial Discussion"

Version: 1 Date: 4 June 2007

Reviewer: M Chew

Reviewer’s report:

General
Thank you for asking me to review this interesting paper
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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. The authors only use simple frequencies in their analysis of the phrases recorded, but it would be wise to give some consideration to likely sources of bias eg were the observer’s notes verbatim? I assume the discussions weren’t recorded – were there particular reasons against this? How “representative” were the observed discussions vs “usual” JAMA editorial meetings (eg comparable numbers of participants/papers, comparable nos of papers at the different stages, similar duration of discussion, etc)?

2. [This comment is really only appropriate if the observations were considered sufficiently representative for valid quantitative evaluation:] Did the authors separately analyse comments for papers that were rejected/accepted/etc? If so and this course was rejected, what were the reasons for this (eg were subgroups too small)? If not, might this be considered for a much more compelling and useful paper?

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

3. Abstract – I’m not sure this could be accurately termed a “cross-sectional” study – perhaps an observational study of editorial discussions, using both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis
4. As a reader, I found it difficult to be sure of the specific research question in both the Abstract and Background sections, as the aims are rather obliquely described – something more explicit may have been helpful eg “We wished to explore the factors influencing major publication decisions from discussions among editors at decision-making meetings”
5. Background, para 2, sentence 2 to end of para – rather anecdotal, and seems to go against the grain of having a null hypothesis prior to conducting a study; suggest omitting this
6. There are several mentions of JAMA’s “mission” or “objectives” but the authors need to specify exactly this/these are
7. Selection criteria – the authors need to give the rationale for studying meetings at JAMA, a high-impact journal whose editors may be influenced by different factors in making publication decisions, compared with editors of “less prestigious” or “lesser-profile” journals
8. Methods, para 1, 4th sentence – comes across as a rather anecdotal comment; has this been somehow measured?
9. Methods para 2 - For the non-specialist reader, what is meant by editors with “managerial” responsibilities?
10. Methods para 3 – what’s meant by the “elements of the paper”? 
11. Methods para 7 – for the purposes of the analysis, how was “publication bias” defined?
12. Methods para 8, 2nd sentence – an editorial comment perhaps better inserted in the Discussion
13. Discussion, para 2, last sentence – not entirely sure what’s meant by “recorded evidence” here, as surely the other studies were also based on recorded measurements, albeit of different types? Might a better phrase be something like “rather than direct observation of editorial discussions”?
14. Discussion, para 5, last sentence – an interesting comment that should be accompanied by a comment on whether such influences were observed in this study
15. Discussion, final para, text “Some parts…decision-making process7-10” – might be more useful mentioned in the Introduction, as this gives a rationale for performing this particular study
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

16. Table 1 – does the text under each item comprise direct examples of phrases used? If so, it would be helpful to state this in the Table caption

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I am currently an Associate editor at the British Medical Journal and was previously Deputy editor at the MEdical Journal of Australia